



MIDDLE
EAST

Part 4

TRAVEL JOURNAL

Turkish delights

On an epic overland journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** take a turn through Turkey, a country of deep-rooted culture and calming coastlines.

From Iztuzu viewpoint (between Bodrum and Fethiye), you look out over Iztuzu Beach, Lake Sülüngür and Lake Köyceğiz in the distance.



Left: A small mosque outside Edirne.

Below, left: This is what a typical fish shop looks like in Edirne.



When we crossed the border from Greece into Turkey, winter finally caught up with us. It was December and snow had started to fall. Midday temperatures barely reached 10°C and sank to -4°C overnight. We had two sleeping bags each, plus beanies and scarves – Marie even wrapped herself in a few plastic bags to keep out the cold!

The evenings were bearable; it's the mornings that were bitter. Camping in a rooftop tent has its challenges: We had to wipe down interior condensation before folding up the frozen tent, then we had to get Kukuza started. Our beloved 2001 Hilux has a 3-litre diesel engine that struggles to get going in the cold. We'd fire up the car's heater and wait for water to boil on a stove so we could have coffee. Slowly, life would return to our clumsy hands, our mobile phones would warm up, we'd set the GPS and start our day of driving.

We crossed from Greece into Turkey via the Kipi/Ipsala border post with one thing on our minds: Get the Carnet de Passage stamped to prove that the Hilux had left Europe. If we didn't get this stamp, we would lose our R90000 deposit made to the AA in Johannesburg. After a few frantic conversations with Greek officials, it was eventually stamped and handed back to us.

We headed over to the Turkish side where we had no issues, besides having the entire vehicle scanned while trying to explain what the large military-coloured thing – our rooftop tent – was.

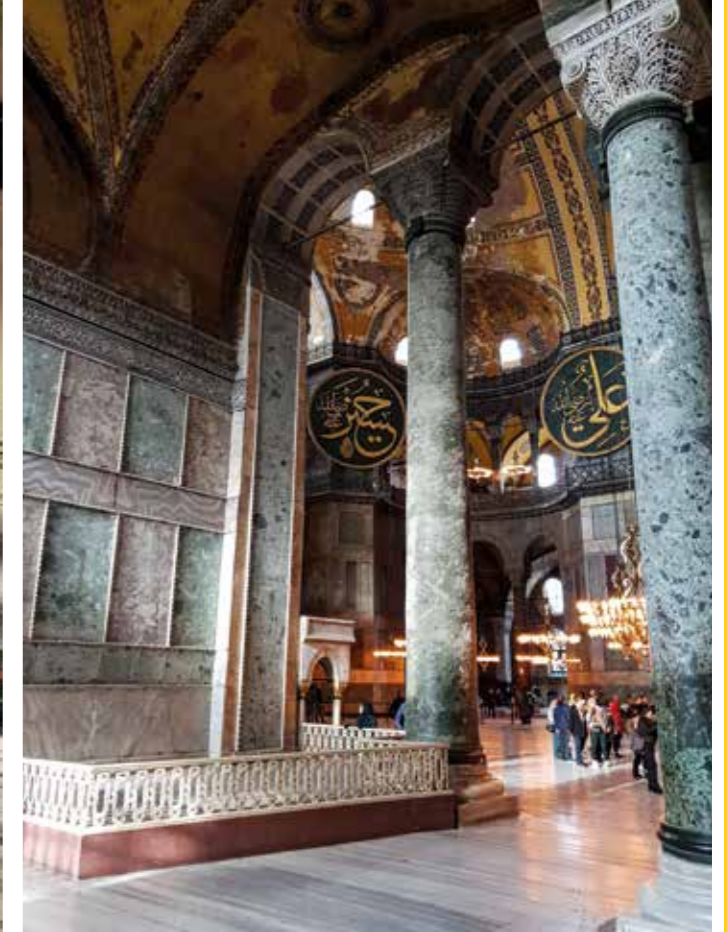
We were finally free to enter Turkey and, more importantly, to find a warm place to sleep in the town of Edirne, which was a 200 km drive away.

The first few days in Turkey gave us three happy moments. The first was checking into Hotel Edirne Palace where the temperature in the lobby was a balmy 28°C, the second was buying a proper winter duvet, which improved our lives considerably, and the third was discovering Turkey's cheap and cheerful (and tasty) fast food.

After a few months on the road, we had learnt that the best way to ensure delicious local eating was to support the fullest restaurant, no matter how grubby it seemed. Turkey had dining establishments that were simple on decor but rich in the variety of food on offer, usually served as a buffet. You point to what you want and a healthy spoonful is added to your plate. Our standard became pilaf rice, beef stew and vegetables, with a bowl of lentil soup. Turkish tea – simply called "chai" – was always offered for free after a meal.

Once the capital of the powerful Ottoman Empire, Edirne (pronounced Eh-der-neh) has a rich history. We were a little perplexed about the buses full of Bulgarians we saw everywhere. "Turkey is cheap," a shopkeeper told us. "Bulgarians come across the border on weekends and buy clothes, food, cigarettes, shoes, perfume. . . It's even cheaper here than in a duty-free shop!"

We visited the stunning Selimiye Mosque, built in 1575 with its four minarets, beautiful calligraphy and famed 999 windows. We also popped into the Sultan Bayezid II Complex (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), originally built as a hospital and medical school. Today it houses a medical museum showcasing the progressive techniques and procedures that were taught to students in the past. This included, for example, treating mental illness using music and aroma therapy.



Above, left: One of the trams to Taksim Square in Istanbul.

Above: The Hagia Sophia's interior is as fascinating as its history.

Pulsating Istanbul

Avoiding the highway, we drove 250 km (five hours) on rural roads directly towards Istanbul. There was no mistaking that we were approaching Europe's most populous city, however. When we were 50 km out, newly built 30-storey residential apartment blocks began to appear, plus massive shopping centres and eventually, jammed highways.

We settled into our Airbnb in the suburb of Balat for a few days. Balat is next to the Golden Horn, a stretch of water that connects with the nearby Bosphorus. It was the cutest, cosiest neighbourhood, crammed with antique shops, street art and trendy cafés – there was even a film crew busy shooting a local soap opera (*7de Laan*, Turkey-style).

Our two sons, Kai and Callum, flew into Istanbul to join us for a while. Before heading to Cappadocia for Christmas, we ticked off a few of the important nearby sites in this old part of the city.

The Blue Mosque (also called the Sultan Ahmed Mosque) has six towering minarets and gets its name from the 20 000 blue Iznik tiles (made centuries ago in a town called Iznik on the Asian side of the Bosphorus) covering the interior floors and walls.

Then there's the Hagia Sophia – over the course of its history, it has been used as a church, then a mosque, then a museum, and more recently as a mosque again. Huge calligraphy panels adorn the marble walls and the whole structure humbles you with its sheer size.

The Basilica Cistern is Istanbul's largest Roman-era subterranean water tank – it has a capacity of 80 000 m³! A wooden walkway took us deep into the cistern to see the two enormous stone Medusa heads, and the 336 marble columns (each 9 m high) which support the spectacular vaulted ceiling.

We took a walk around Topkapi Palace, which was once home to the sultans and Europe's largest harem. Back when dating more than 100 women was par for the royal course, it contained more than 300 rooms, nine baths, two mosques, a hospital and laundry facilities.

After visiting the Galata Tower, built in 1348 as a "Tower of Christ" and later used as a vantage point to spot fires in the city, we went to the Grand Bazaar and did some shopping for much-needed thermal gear. The bazaar is one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the world, with 61 alleyways and around 4000 shops.

We loved exploring Istanbul. We took a tram to Taksim Square, enjoyed *lokum* (the original Turkish delight) and ate fish wraps on a bridge over the Bosphorus, where hundreds of fishermen gather each day.

Before leaving Istanbul, we needed to have a box built for our roof rack. This storage box would hold a number of items that were getting in the way of everyday life on the road. Google recommended a fabricator on the outskirts of Istanbul. "It's going to be a challenge," I told a man called Korkut when we got there with our bakkie. "I need it done in six days. . ."

"No problem," Korkut said. "Let's measure what we need to do. . . Oh, and how do you want it to lock?"

Amazingly, within four days, the massive trunk was cut, bent and welded using galvanised metal – and only cost R500! They even added a dust-proof foam seal around the lid. Turkey is truly an industrialised nation of can-doers. Most items you buy in Turkey are indeed made in Turkey, which was refreshing to see.

Our Made-in-Turkey trunk would travel another 38 000 km over the course of the following year, not once leaking water or dust, only to be destroyed when we arrived safely in South Africa and pulled into a friend's garage in Randburg. I sent Korkut a photo of the smashed box and he replied: "When you come back to Istanbul, I'll make you a new one for free!"



Left, from the top: A roadside stall just outside Göreme sells traditional earthenware pots. Cappadocia is known for its unique, cone-shaped rock formations. It's easy to see why they're called "fairy chimneys".

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Compared to these mammoth overland trucks, Patrick and Marie's Toyota almost looks like a toy. Pamukkale's white travertine formations surround a mineral spring, said to have healing properties. Sons Kai and Callum wait for their *testi kebab* – an Anatolian speciality usually made with lamb, and prepared in a clay pot or jug.

Christmas in Cappadocia

Cappadocia is 800 km by road from Istanbul – it's a region in Central Anatolia famed for its bizarre scenery, where honey-coloured rocks have eroded into sculptural forms resembling minarets, mushrooms and what are called "fairy chimneys". Since we had limited time with Kai and Callum, we tucked Kukuza into a warm and secure underground parking area and took a cab to the airport.

A one-hour flight delivered us to the town of Göreme. We booked a family room in the Sakura Cave Hotel which, you guessed it, is partially built into the hollowed-out rocks.

We awoke the next morning to find 30 cm-deep snow covering the landscape. We scurried into the hotel restaurant to fill up on breakfast before heading out with our driver/guide. He told us that the area had been inhabited since the Bronze Age, first by troglodytes (could there be a better place to be a cave dweller?) and later by Christians fleeing persecution from the Roman Empire.

Impressive tunnelling into the soft volcanic rock has resulted in entire subterranean cities like Derinkuyu, where up to 20 000 people once lived underground. Walking along the cold labyrinth of passageways to see cave houses and churches kept us busy for a while, but we eventually had to get out of the snow and heat up. We ordered some *boza*, a warm, smoothie-like fermented drink made from cracked wheat and yeast. It has a tangy, sweet flavour that almost everyone finds addictive.

Kai and Callum both love cooking, so Marie booked us a cooking class hosted by a local family. Fried liver is serious business in Turkey; we were given the inside track on this and a few other local dishes. A highlight was making tiny ravioli and trying Turkish coffee. The art of brewing the latter is thought to date back to the 16th century. Rich, thick and delicious, it's brewed in a copper pot called a *cezve* (jazz-vah).

Christmas in Cappadocia was a special time for us as a family. We discovered cool cave bars together, and restaurants serving Turkish feasts. Unfortunately, we never got to open our "family" Christmas present. We had booked a hot-air balloon ride for Christmas morning, but unseasonal wind plagued the balloon pilots that day. (On peak tourist days, up to 80 balloons take to the air above Cappadocia.) They tried to accommodate us the following day, but to no avail.

We had to return to Istanbul, where we saw the boys onto their flight back home to France. With two days to go to New Year's 2019, we were at a bit of a loose end. On a whim, we booked tickets for a boat party on the Bosphorus. It ended up being a fantastic night spent in the company of locals, other tourists, a belly dancer who thought I was part of her act, a crazy-bad DJ, cheap wine and way too many shots of *raki* (a clear brandy made with grapes).

The countdown to midnight started a few minutes early, but at that point nothing mattered besides screaming "Happy New Year!" and taking dreadful selfies and making those embarrassing calls to friends far away. What a night!



Hello, Asia!

After collecting our new storage box and bolting it to the roof rack, we left the European side of Turkey and entered the Asian – or Middle Eastern – side. We took a southerly route along a combination of tar and gravel roads, first aiming for the UNESCO site of Ephesus at the big town of Izmir.

A lot of travellers don't seem to realise how many amazing archaeological sites are dotted around Turkey – easily as many as neighbouring Greece, including some of the best-preserved Greco-Roman sites. Take Ephesus, for example. Once an enormous port city on the Aegean, Ephesus houses the remains of the Temple of Hadrian, terrace houses, colonnaded streets, temples and a huge amphitheatre with a capacity for 24 000 people! The most arresting sight of all is the impressive Library of Celsus, a columned, two-storey building that was the third-largest library in the classical world.

Our next stop was the town of Bodrum, about 230 km down the coast from Izmir. Once a sleepy fishing village, Bodrum has transformed into one of Turkey's most popular holiday spots. Sunshine was predicted over the few days of our stay – we hadn't made any plans, so we just drifted along, soaking up the relaxed vibe.

We camped wild along the coast in quiet little coves, where the water sparkled so bright and blue it almost hurt your eyes.

After Bodrum, we headed inland for about 280 km, to a town called Pamukkale. In Europe, on the first part of our road trip, we had mainly crossed paths with standard-sized motorhomes. But approaching Pamukkale, we encountered a few huge overland trucks huddled together. Since we were looking for a campsite, we pulled in to say hello.

The enormous rigs dwarfed our Hilux. Someone had a 1964 Magirus Deutz Mercur truck (a decommissioned fire engine) and there was also a 1968 IFA 4x4 (a type of East German troop carrier). These amazing vehicles had everything you could imagine – one even had a wood-burning fireplace! My FOMO was peaking until we started discussing fuel consumption. On average, these beasts gulped 28–32 litres per 100 km! I was happy to be driving Kukuza, which consumes a measly 8–10 litres per 100 km. Marie and I reasoned that we would use the money we were saving on fuel to occasionally splash out on a nice Airbnb.

Pamukkale means "cotton castle" in Turkish – the name refers to the strange white calcite formations that have formed into terraces around a mineral spring over thousands of years. The terraces almost look like the tiers of a wedding cake. The Romans loved this healing spring and its travertine pools so much that they built a spa town called Hierapolis at the site. Apparently, Cleopatra had her own private hot tub here.



Burning rocks and stuffed mussels

Our Turkey guidebook had a substantial section devoted to the Lycian civilisation, which piqued our interest. We pointed Kukuza south on a 250 km journey to the town of Fethiye, back at the coast. Along the way we camped at Lake Köyceğiz, which also had a hot spring.

This southern section of Turkey is seldom visited, but no less impressive than the north. Long before the area came to be influenced by the Greeks and Romans (around 500 BC), a group of people called the Lycians inhabited a large stretch of this coastline. They had a fierce desire for independence, spoke their own language, were very resourceful, and are credited with the earliest application of a form of governance that inspired modern-day democracy.

Our 280 km Lycian route from Fethiye to the village of Cirali took us past beautiful cut-rock tombs at Telmessos (similar to Petra in Jordan), through the ancient city of Patara (the Lycian political capital) and finally to some strangely styled pillar tombs and sarcophagi cut from solid granite, around the secluded village of Kekova.

Hugging the coast, we eventually reached Cirali (also called Olympos Beach), which is known as a bit of a Mediterranean hippy hangout. The major attraction here is the "Eternal Flames" on nearby Mount Chimaera.

Guided by Bob Marley tunes filtering from a bar below, we navigated the steep footpath up the mountain, just as a drizzle set in. Soon we reached a bare patch of hillside, where about a dozen mysterious flames flickered. Mount Chimaera has been "on fire" for thousands of years. The mesmerising flames are fuelled by biogenic methane gas that comes from deep in the earth. Legend has it that this was where the Olympic flame originated.

We camped wild in the area, and the following day we popped into the hippy town to visit the Cactus Bar and try *Midye dolma* – mussels stuffed with aromatic rice and served with freshly sliced lemon. Super tasty.

A Zimbabwean makes a plan

From Cirali, we drove 600 km over two days to reach the port city of Mersin, which was where our two-month Turkish journey would end. Much like the Muslim call to prayer summoning the devout, Turkey is a country that calls you into its arms. We usually steer clear of the dreaded overlander question, "Which was your favourite country?" But in truth, Turkey is the answer that comes to mind most often. Istanbul is one of the most incredible cities on the planet – Marie and I decided we could easily live there for a few years.

But where to from here? We still hadn't worked out how to negotiate

Above: Fethiye is not as touristy as other parts of Turkey, but in terms of scenery, Ölüdeniz Bay can hold a candle to the more popular beaches.

Left, from the top: Turkey has many important archaeological sites, like these rock tombs – relics from the ancient Lycian city of Telmessos – and the remains of a temple in Ephesus. Mount Chimaera's flames have been constantly burning for thousands of years.

the less politically stable part of the Middle East, which now lay ahead: Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Most overlanders simply bypass this region as it's too much effort.

Marie flew back to South Africa for work, from Adana near Mersin via Istanbul, leaving me with 10 days to find a solution to our dilemma. It's difficult to enter Israel with your own vehicle. Information was scant on the Internet, but I figured out three certainties: Lebanon was a no-go because Israel wouldn't let us in if we had Lebanese stamps in our passports; Syria was out due to the ongoing conflict, plus the same passport stamp issue; and Egypt wouldn't allow us in if we had Israeli stamps! What a mess.

Turkey shares a southern border with Syria and Iraq, so we'd have to ship Kukuza to our next country of choice – but where? We opted to try and enter Israel directly despite the difficulties, rather than ship the bakkie to Egypt and then backtrack north into Israel and Jordan. It was all a bit nerve-racking.

After many phone calls and e-mails (a process I started midway through Greece already), I eventually tracked down the local agent of a RoRo service (roll-on/roll-off), which shipped directly into the Israeli port city of Haifa. The agent, Tiran/Turkon-Akdeniz Shipping, was not keen on accepting the Hilux as cargo, as they normally only took refrigerated fresh-produce trucks. Eventually, I convinced him that I had clearing agents arranged in Haifa.

I also confirmed that Marie could fly into Israel to meet up with Kukuza and me. With the shipping booked and paid for, I set out to have new signage applied to the bakkie, adding a big map that showed our whole route from Europe to Africa. This made things easier as we could just point at the map when people asked where we were heading. Then I had Kukuza thoroughly cleaned and readied for the voyage.

The Hilux and I boarded a ship called *Beril* on 4 February 2019, without any assurance from our two clearing agents that we would even get into Israel. Being a born and bred Zimbabwean, I just rolled with that "boer maak 'n plan" confidence and believed it would all work out in the end.

But would it?

Find out in the next issue, as the Gurneys make tracks through the Middle East.

Fast facts

The prices below are just to provide an approximate idea of Patrick and Marie's costs during their trip. Keep in mind that they travelled in 2018/19 and prices will have changed.

EDIRNE

Hotel Edirne Palace: R1 275 (three nights)
Sultan Bayezid II Complex: R85 per person entry
Duvet: R476
Buffet dinner: R85 per person

ISTANBUL

Airbnb Istanbul: R2 700 (five nights)
The Blue Mosque: Free (all mosques are free – a nice change from Romania)
Hagia Sophia: R200 per person entry
Basilica Cistern: R230 per person entry
Topkapi Palace: R190 per person entry
Galata Tower: R180 per person entry
Bosporus New Year's party: R900 per person (incl. food and drinks)

CAPPADOCIA

Flight: R850 per person (return flight from Istanbul to Cappadocia)
Sakura Cave Hotel: R7 200 (five nights, for four adults)
Driver/guide: R2 600 (two-day

service, including airport transfers)
Cooking class: R360 per person

OTHER

Ephesus: R150 per person entry
Pamukkale: R150 per person entry
Shipping the vehicle from Turkey to Israel: R17 000 (including all clearing fees)
Patrick's fare aboard the same ship: R2 250 (including meals and a truck driver's cabin big enough to sleep three)

NOTE

We have previously published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey – see issues #158–166 for their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issue #175 (France, Italy, Croatia), #176 (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria) and #177 (Greece).

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km, before arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.

MORE INFO

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